

Guest Editorial: Newsletter of the
Association of Ground Water Scientists and Engineers (AGWSE)

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Let There be Standing: An Editorial

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In a 1985 *Ground Water* editorial, Jay Lehr proposed "Let There be Stoning" (see Vol. 23, pp. 162-165). He had been recently subjected to one more boring, incomprehensible talk at a scientific meeting. By his own admission he stood up after the talk and humiliated the speaker for insulting his audience. Since then, "Let There Be Stoning" has been echoed in the halls of many AGWSE meetings. Yet, some talks are still boring; some are still incomprehensible; and some talks are still accompanied by unreadable (but sometimes colorful) slides. Jay said that as far back as his graduate school days, he had been frustrated by the poor quality of many talks at scientific meetings. In his editorial, he gave a host of good suggestions to improve talks but they are generally not put into action.

Although improving the presentation skills of scientists and engineers is worthwhile, maybe we should also consider changing the format of our AGWSE technical meetings. The current format of most earth science meetings consists of sessions with 15- or 20-minute talks. Because the time slots include one or two minutes for introductions and transition to the next speaker and two to three minutes for questions, the talks are actually only 11 minutes or 16 minutes long. That is barely enough time to present an abstract.

Although Jay is correct to insist that the speaker has an obligation to use his or her 11 minutes or 16 minutes well, such short talks may be too shallow or too rushed to be of much value. To understand an interesting aspect of someone's work usually takes an understanding of a complicated geologic setting or mathematical derivation or statistical analysis. The time invested in studying the setting, derivation, or analysis may be worthwhile. Such study takes different amounts of time for different people. The oral presentation provides the same amount of time for everyone, but is too slow for some and too fast for others.

The poster session, which has many virtues, is a viable alternative (or supplement) to the oral session. It permits each attendee to optimize their time according to their own interests. They can skip posters that are not relevant to their needs (as well as skipping those that are boring or incomprehensible). If an attendee finds a poster interesting, they can study and absorb the presenter's findings at their own pace; they are not locked into a fixed time frame. Thus, a poster session permits the interested attendee to go into much more depth on a specific topic than is possible with a talk.

Poster presentation also has advantages for the author. The strict time constraint is eliminated, and the author can customize the discussion in response to the interests and needs of the people that come to see the poster. The author can also receive much more feedback than is possible from one or two questions at the end of an oral presentation; thus, the author can learn as well as teach. In addition, the author of a poster knows that the audience consists of people who are interested in what he or she is doing. The flip side of this, of course, is the risk that no one will stop to look at a particular poster. This should give the author a clear message that either the poster was presented very poorly or that nobody is interested in that subject. This may be a painful but nevertheless valuable lesson.

Having many more presentations given as posters will also enhance the educational aspects of the technical conference. It frees up time for plenary sessions where the organizers can include several keynote speakers who can be allocated longer time slots (perhaps 30 to 60 minutes) for more comprehensive integrated oral presentations on timely and important topics.

We propose that AGWSE technical conferences be designed so that the majority of technical presentations are given as posters rather than talks. This has significant advantages for both the attendee and the presenter. Poster presenters would not be subjected to the tyranny of the clock and would have no need to worry that Jay Lehr is in the audience. Let's have less sitting and more standing at our technical conferences.

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